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ABSTRACT

Civil rights issues of disabled people are gradually gaining attention from the news media. Deaf persons made that clear in 1988 during the "Deaf President Now" movement at Gallaudet University. A study looked at "Washington Post" and "New York Times" coverage of deaf persons from 1986 to 1990 to quantify the coverage and presentation of deaf persons. The research compared articles on the Deaf President Now movement and general articles on deaf persons to discern if deaf people are covered within traditional or progressive disability models. The analysis looked at how the models were presented in terms of content and placement. The study also tried to discern any change in newspaper presentation after the Gallaudet protest. Both deaf and hearing coders were used in analyzing the data. Findings showed that deaf persons and their issues are rarely prominent news unless they are involved in a civil rights protest. When they are part of a protest, newspaper coverage follows a progressive model, showing deaf persons as a legitimate minority group and as culturally plural people. When they are covered within general news and features, many times they are presented as medically or economically defective. After the protest, the presentation of deaf persons improved and became more even-handed. In the two years after the protest, the number of stories reflecting the traditional forms of presentation fell from 62% to 40%. (Four tables of data are included and 37 references are attached.) (Author/SR)

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Paternalism and Protest: The Presentation of Deaf Persons in the New York Times and Washington Post

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Abstract

Civil rights issues of disabled people are gradually gaining attention from the news media. Deaf persons made that clear in 1988 during the Deaf President Now movement at Gallaudet University. This study looks at Washington Post and New York Times coverage of deaf persons from 1986 to 1990 to quantify the coverage and presentation of deaf persons. The research compared articles on the Deaf President Now movement and general articles on deaf persons to discern if deaf people are covered within traditional or progressive disability models. The analysis looked at how the models were presented in terms of content and placement. This study also tried to discern any change in newspaper presentation after the Gallaudet protest. Both deaf and hearing coders were used in analyzing the data.

Findings showed that deaf persons and their issues are rarely prominent news unless they are involved in a civil rights protest. When they are part of a protest, newspaper coverage follows a progressive model, showing deaf persons as a legitimate minority group and as culturally plural people. When they are covered within general news and features, many times they are presented as medically or economically defective.

After protest, the presentation of deaf persons improved and became more even-handed. In the two years after the protest, the number of stories reflecting the traditional forms of presentation fell from 62 percent to 40 percent.

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In the late 1980s a new resolve overtook a portion of the U.S. deaf community. They had become tired of the paternalism of some hearing people. In 1988 their push to take control of their destiny drew national media attention.

The event centered on a student protest at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., the world's only university for deaf people. There, students shut down the campus for seven days after a hearing woman was appointed as university president over two qualified deaf candidates. She knew no sign language, which is considered by many deaf people to be their native language, and had no knowledge of the cultural traditions of deaf people.

Many members of the U.S. news media embraced the student protest, providing numerous stories and supportive editorials. "As the week wore on a love affair developed between the media and the students" (Gannon, 1989, p. 92). The protest was seen as good and proper. The media presented the uprising within a metaphor Jankowski (1990) calls "the plantation." The oppressed were breaking free of their oppressors.

This research studies how this week of positive presentation compares with the everyday presentation of deaf persons in two major U.S. newspapers - the Washington Post and the New York Times. This research was designed to discern how deaf people were presented generally in those two newspapers and how that coverage compares to the presentation of deaf persons during protest.

All articles about deaf persons or issues related to deafness from 1986 through 1990 were collected for a content analysis. A separate analysis examined all articles related to the Deaf President Now movement. The analysis helped determine any differences between protest and non-protest presentation, seeking to determine whether media reinforced stereotypes through

coverage. Another goal of the study was to determine whether presentations of deaf persons changed after the Deaf President Now protest.

Literature Review

Previous research by primarily rehabilitation and education researchers has found that the media present disabled persons inaccurately or negatively because of their physical and social deviations (Nunnally, 1973; Dillon, Byrd, and Byrd, 1980; Byrd and Pipes, 1981; Elliot and Byrd, 1982; Elliot, 1983; and Bonstetter, 1986). Deaf people[1], some 13 million Americans (Schein and Delk, 1974), face a unique challenge in obtaining fair media presentation. Traditional channels of self-presentation in media -- speaking and being quoted -- are strained or unavailable for deaf persons.

In addition, distance from media norms is created by the visual language of deaf persons, American Sign Language, which is rarely understood outside the schools and families of deaf people. Therefore, deaf persons provide an optimal group for study because they have their own linguistic tradition, and society views them as a segment of the larger disabled population.

Deviance theory posits that a group will be seen as deviant if its actions are perceived as breaking from the dominant social order (Becker, 1963). Deviance is created by society, not by the people seen as deviant, according to Becker. For example, in a physically reserved country like the United States, people who use expressive facial and body movements and speak with

[1] Persons who are considered culturally deaf are typically referred to with a capital "D" because of their use of American Sign Language and their adherence to cultural norms of the Deaf community (Woodward, 1972). Audiologically deaf persons are usually referred to with a lowercase "d". Because this paper will deal with all aspects of deafness and not just audiologically and culturally deaf persons, this researcher will use a lowercase "d" throughout the paper. Hopefully, this will provide consistency and clarity for the reader. No offense is meant to culturally Deaf persons.

their hands could be labeled deviant. Thus, deaf persons who speak in sign language receive the label.

When a group is labeled as deviant, this label affects the social interaction between the group and the members of the larger society. "Informally, interpersonal relations between nondisabled and disabled persons tend to follow a superior-inferior model of social interaction or to be nonexistent" (English, 1977, p. 163).

In studying the presentation of deaf persons in the Washington Post and New York Times, this research used a theoretical model employed by Clogston (1990) in one of the few mass media studies of disabled persons. In his content analysis of 13 newspapers and three newsmagazines, he categorized media portrayal of disabled persons in two ways:

* A traditional disability model presents a disabled person as defective in a medical or economic way, assuming that problems arise because an individual is disabled, not from society.

* The progressive model views people as disabled by society, not a physical attribute. The handicap is society's inability to adapt its physical, social, and occupational environment and its attitudes to disabled persons.

Clogston's findings revealed that more than 60 percent of the articles covered disability using the traditional model. Only 13.2 percent of the articles presented disabled persons within the progressive minority-civil rights model. However, a majority of the articles (62.6 percent) were issue-oriented, showing that disability is covered more seriously than expected.

Few mass communication researchers have assessed the presentation of disabled groups in mass media (Clogston, 1989), and only two studies can be found that relate to deaf persons and the mass media. Journalists in Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles, Calif., were surveyed

about their understanding of deafness in 1976 (Gilbert). Gilbert concluded from the survey that journalists in both cities have some general knowledge of the deaf community, but that there is still misunderstanding of deafness and deaf persons.

Gilbert also studied the content of newspapers and television in Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., from 1972 to 1975. In the Los Angeles Times articles, Gilbert found the articles to be positive and objective, although the number of articles was limited. Most of those that do appear began on the front page of a section. In the Washington Post articles, she concluded that the articles presented a comprehensive view of deafness and deaf persons. Some articles touched upon the barriers deaf persons face, but more often they unrealistically focused on the success of deaf persons and misrepresented the accessibility of services to them. Gilbert noted, as well, that both the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times had references to deaf persons as "deaf and dumb" and "deaf mute" in some of its articles.

Jankowski (1990) studied the 1988 Gallaudet protest within the framework of a metaphor. She found the recurring themes during the protest to be Gallaudet -- "the plantation," which metaphorically refers to deaf persons as slaves trying to break free from hearing masters, and "the week the world heard Gallaudet," which reveals a consistent use of sound images in the media coverage of the protest. Jankowski explains that the hearing journalists have a different world view about sound and silence than do deaf persons. Culturally deaf persons usually do not see the absence of sound as abnormal. However, the media "reflect the pathological view that the ability to hear is all that matters" (p. 20).

In sociological literature, deafness is viewed on several levels: as a disability,[2] as a communication problem, and as a culture. Higgins (1980) in his sociological study of deafness and deaf culture explains that there is one aspect to deafness that makes it unique as a stigma and a cultural tie. "Deafness is not just a stigma; it is also an impairment which disrupts communication with the hearing" (Higgins, 1980, p. 142). This can limit interaction between the two groups, therefore affecting their presentation in the mass media.

In addition, hearing people may see deafness as a master status for deaf persons. The stigma, not the individual characteristics of the person, becomes the main attribute (Goffman, 1963). The stigma may also spread to other characteristics of the person as well. The spread for people who are deaf is toward their mental capabilities, according to Higgins. In the old days, people were called deaf and dumb. Although dumb referred to being mute, it denoted lack of intelligence as well. Because prelingually deaf people may speak in a voice with limited tones, this adds to a societal perception of "dumbness."

Burd (1977) found that disabled persons and older persons seemed to receive the same type of media coverage that other minority groups such as the poor and blacks received in the 1960s, possibly because disabled persons and older persons took issues such as access and segregation to the media.

In comic books, however, there is a consistent stereotype of the evil deformed person. Weinberg and Santana (1978) sampled 40 different superhero comic books and found that the

[2] Because some deaf people identify themselves as a separate culture, they may not align their community with a larger group called the disability community. In the view of deaf persons, disabled persons are those people who are blind or physically handicapped, not deaf (Padden and Humphries, 1988). But when political policies are at stake, deaf leaders many times do align themselves with disabled persons and therefore can be termed part of the disabled community.

physically disabled people usually fell into two categories - either good or evil. In their study, 57 percent of the disabled people were considered evil, while 43 percent were considered good. None of the disabled characters fell into the neutral category.

Weinberg and Santana speculated that the disabled characters were seen as evil because of the phenomenon of spread. Therefore, characters with a physical disability may be portrayed as inferior in other ways as well. On the other hand, disabled characters may be presented as angelic because of an attitude that disabled people must be extraordinary to "overcome" the disability.

Analyzing prime time television, Donaldson (1981) found that disabled people rarely appeared in television shows, but when they did, they were portrayed negatively rather than positively. The negative portrayal showed disabled persons as a danger to society or linked to evil. Donaldson concluded that TV may sustain stereotypes of disabled persons rather than assist in their acceptance by society.

Klobas' 1988 analysis of disability drama in television and films over 11 years showed that television programs dealt with emotions and physical differentness, rather than confronting the real issues disabled people must face. Klobas asserted that this screen image overflows to TV news and newspapers, which continually cover disabled people as human interest stories and as courageous and inspirational.

Because deaf people are a distinctive cultural group and have civil rights concerns about access, the literature on the presentation of minority groups in the media is relevant. Chaudhary's 1980 study of the presentation of black elected officials in the press during the 1970s found that black officials receive a little more coverage but the article content is more negative than those

articles on white elected officials.

Martindale's research (1988) on the coverage of African-Americans in major U.S. newspapers over 40 years showed that although coverage of black people has increased, many articles continue to portray them with stereotypes rather than reporting on the barriers to equality that many African-Americans still face.

Bowe (1978) explained that when looking at perceptions of disabled people, literature and mass media may be even more powerful than personal contact because one-on-one interaction with disabled people may be restricted by the barriers of architecture, transportation, or communication.

A whole body of research exists in the field of social psychology on the interactions between deaf and hearing people and between disabled and non-disabled people. Richardson, Hastorf, Goodman, and Dornbusch (1961) showed the cultural uniformity of children preferring a photograph of an able bodied child. Kleck, Ono, and Hastorf (1966) found nondisabled people exhibit stereotyped, inhibited, and over-controlled behavior in the presence of a person with a physical disability. Langer, Fiske, Taylor, and Chanowitz (1976) showed that discomfort with disabled persons may take place because of a conflict over wanting to stare but also wanting to adhere to societal norms against staring.

In a study of deaf people in Baltimore, Md., Furfey and Harte (1968) confirmed that hearing people have little social contact with the deaf and little knowledge of deafness. This lack of knowledge about the deaf community could be reflected in newspapers with lesser coverage of the deaf community.

Higgins (1980) proposes that these tense and difficult interactions between deaf and

hearing people create barriers to better understanding. Therefore, the stigma of deafness is rarely reduced through greater interaction.

The societal perception of deaf persons as deviant is part of U.S. culture and therefore invades the perceptions of journalists. As Carey (1989) proposes, news stories are culturally constructed narratives. Numerous mass media studies have shown how the perceptions and attitudes of reporters leak into their stories. Drew (1975), Stocking and Gross (1989), Gans (1980), David Manning White (1950), and Olien, Tichenor and Donohue (1989) all showed how the values, perceptions, and attitudes of journalists filter into news stories.

Research Questions

This research seeks to address the following questions about the presentation of deaf persons in the Washington Post and the New York Times:

1) How are deaf persons presented in the Washington Post and New York Times?

2) How many and what kind of stories are presented about deaf persons?

3) What are the differences in the presentations of deaf persons when they are in a protest situation and when they are in general news or feature stories?

4) Were there changes in the coverage of deaf persons after the Deaf President Now protest?

Methodology

In analyzing the content of articles in the New York Times and Washington Post from 1986 to 1990, both the latent and manifest meanings in the newspaper stories were considered. Individual newspaper stories were the units of analyses. The Washington Post and the New York

Times were chosen because they are national newspapers with acknowledged influence over other media. In addition, the Washington Post has the added advantage of being the local newspaper for the District of Columbia metropolitan area, which has one of the larger concentrations of deaf persons in the United States and is home to Gallaudet University.

Table 1 shows the number of stories about deaf persons in the two newspapers from 1986 to 1990. All stories about deaf persons, deafness, Gallaudet University, and sign language that were listed in the newspaper indexes were analyzed.

Part of the research analyzed the following characteristics in the newspaper stories: its date, the section of the newspaper, its appearance on the front of the section or on an inside page, staff or freelance byline, type of story (news, feature, or news-feature), and issue orientation (focus on issue or individual).

In noting how deafness was presented, the stories were coded on whether the story noted sign language use or interpretation, whether the story used traditional or progressive language in describing a deaf person, whether a deaf person was actually quoted or paraphrased in the article, and which Clogston disability model was used, traditional or progressive.

The traditional model presents a person who is deaf as malfunctioning in a medical or economic way. The category includes stories about "supercrips," people who "overcome their disabilities," and are "inspiring" (Clogston, p. 36). Language under this model includes terms such as "deaf and dumb" or "stone deaf."

The traditional presentation is broken into two models: the medical model and the social pathology model. In the medical model, deafness is seen as illness, which makes the deaf person dependent on others for cures or help. In the social pathology model, the deaf person is seen as

a disadvantaged person who must look to the state or to society for economic support. The progressive model, however, views people as disabled by society's inability to adapt its physical, social, and occupational environment and its attitudes to deaf persons. The progressive presentation encompasses two models: the minority/civil rights model and the cultural pluralism model. In the minority/civil rights model, the person who is deaf is seen as a member of the deaf community, which has legitimate political grievances. In the cultural pluralism model, the person who is deaf is seen as a multifaceted person and his or her deafness does not receive undue attention. Progressive language includes terms such as "deaf persons" and "is deaf."

The newspaper stories that dealt specifically with the Deaf President Now movement were compared to the general articles on deaf persons from 1986 to 1990.

The universe of articles was analyzed by a hearing researcher, the author of this paper. In addition, two hearing coders and two deaf coders analyzed a large number of the universe of articles. They read the stories, and from a list a 14 characteristics selected any that they thought applied to the stories. The 14 characteristics included seven traditional and seven progressive characteristics, although the coders did not know which they were. General scores on the number of progressive and traditional traits in the articles were obtained, and then the responses of the four coders were compared with the researcher as a measure of intercoder reliability.[3]

Findings

When looking at the results of the analysis of the complete universe of stories, several

[3] To verify intercoder reliability, a random sample of 16 stories was used to compare the findings of the researcher and the four other coders. For each story it was determined whether the coders had chosen a majority of progressive traits or traditional traits. The researcher and the coders agreed 89 percent of the time.

characteristics of news presentation of deaf persons and their issues become clear: Deaf persons rarely figure in the top news stories of the day. Stories about deaf persons end up in sections other than the front (A) section or metro (local) section 48 percent of the time. These stories made a strong showing in suburban section inserts in the two newspapers. And stories about deaf persons made the front page of a section only 30 percent of the time. And a large number of those front page stories stemmed from Deaf President Now coverage, which is included in the total group of articles.

About 20 percent of the stories were written by freelance reporters, not staff reporters of the Washington Post. The characteristics of New York Times reporters could not be assessed because their bylines do not indicate whether a reporter is a freelancer or not (Staff member, Interview, 1991). Almost 60 percent of the articles fell under the heading of feature or news-feature. Yet 56 percent of the total articles found their news peg in an issue rather than an individual. That number lessens, however, when the Deaf President Now stories are subtracted from the total stories. In addition, progressive language, rather than traditional, was used 52 percent of the time. Deaf people were also allowed to speak for themselves or through an interpreter in 71 percent of the stories. See Table 2.

Table 3 compares how the disability models were reflected in the Deaf President Now stories and the general stories. The results clearly show how newspapers follow the progressive "minority" model of presentation of deaf persons when they are involved in a protest movement such as Deaf President Now. In the general articles on deaf persons and their issues, the two newspapers still use traditional models of disability 52 percent of the time.

As expected, the language used in stories that presented the traditional models tended to

be more traditional; the traditional model stories used progressive language only 25 percent of the time. But the progressive stories still used much traditional language at 41 percent. The progressive stories tend to use more progressive language than the traditional stories use traditional language. This could mean that reporters do gradually become aware of language changes and reflect that in the stories they do. It should be noted that in the Deaf President Now stories Washington Post reporters seemed to make a concerted effort to use progressive terms such as "deaf persons."

In the orientation of the articles toward issues or individuals, the disability models fell into expected patterns. If the story was issue-oriented, the minority-civil rights model accounted for 48 percent of the stories. Again, it should be remembered that most of the Deaf President Now articles fall into the minority model, thus boosting this percentage considerably. More disturbing is the finding that 22 percent of issue-oriented stories follow the social pathology model and 19 percent follow the medical model. Issue-oriented stories are typically more substantive news than a feature or profile story. Even when stories are discussing important issues in the deaf community, 41 percent of the stories follow the traditional model of depicting deaf people as defective or needing a handout.

These traditional models would be expected in individual-oriented stories, and there the traditional models accounted for 50 percent of the stories. Some of these stories could be termed "supercrip" stories, and some are focused on people "overcoming their disability." The progressive cultural pluralism model was reflected in 45 percent of the individual-oriented stories as well.

Interestingly, the progressive model stories were more likely to quote deaf people, either

directly or through an interpreter. The two progressive models accounted for 70 percent of the stories that gave attribution to deaf persons. This was an unexpected finding, but it does seem logical that traditional model stories that see deaf people as defective or needing a handout would be less likely to quote them. This has implications for organizations of deaf people who are trying to get their message across to newspapers that still embrace traditional models.

In comparing the coverage in the years before and after the Deaf President Now movement, the results show that there was some change in coverage after the protest. At 95 percent, the majority of the Deaf President Now articles fell into the progressive models. Before the protest in 1986-87, 62 percent of the articles reflected the traditional disability models. In the two years after the protest, the number of stories reflecting the traditional forms of presentation fell to 40 percent. Table 4 illustrates these results.

Conclusions

This study on the presentation of deaf persons in newspapers reveals that coverage of deaf persons is similar to that of other disabled groups. By looking at the Deaf President Now movement separately, this research showed that when deaf persons are not involved in a strong "hard news" story such as protest, they end up in feature stories on inside pages. But when they do conform to news values and draw national attention through protest they do draw even-handed coverage.

It appears that a disabled group can break free of more stereotypical coverage when they promote their concerns vigorously enough. The traditional disability models fell away during the Deaf President Now movement, and deaf persons were seen within the progressive model as a

minority group with genuine civil rights concerns or as multifaceted people whose deafness does not appear as a stigma.

These findings have implications for all disabled groups suggesting that they should concentrate boldly on the civil rights issues, plugging into the journalistic news values of importance and prominence, rather than promoting the activities of the extraordinary disabled person, which the media recast as "supercrip" stories.

Within the world of journalism, a re-education needs to take place. Both journalism schools and U.S. newsrooms should reevaluate how they cover disabled persons. Too often they fall into the trap of a single journalistic news value: oddity. For example, in 1986 a New York Times suburban section presented a long feature on a deaf student pitching for her high school softball team (Ruden, 1986). Media members need to be taught that stories such as those no longer fit news values because disabled persons participate fully in most aspects of life. And reporters are missing better stories about a large segment of U.S. population that loses civil rights because of society's physical, social, and attitudinal barriers. Newspapers should begin to understand that millions of their audience members have some type of disability and are interested in these subjects.

The findings that show some improvement in the presentation of deaf persons after the Deaf President Now movement are a good beginning. Hopefully, the Gallaudet protest and the attention it drew helped educate U.S. journalists about issues in the deaf community and proper language use in covering them. But because the protest occurred so recently, further study is warranted to see if newspapers will continue to present deaf persons less stereotypically.

TABLE 1
Number of stories on deaf persons and issues, 1986-1990

	1986	1987	1988*	1989	1990
Wash. Post	12	9	32/15	11	13
NY Times	17	16	9/13	9	6^

Total (N=162)

* Note: The first number under 1988 indicates stories specifically about the Deaf President Now Movement at Gallaudet University.

^ The NY Times 1990 figures represent those stories available in the index through October.

TABLE 2
News Coverage of Deaf Persons: General Characteristics

	Overall stories (N = 162)	General (N = 121)	DeafPrezNow (N = 41)
Placement			
Front	31 %	21.5 %	58.5 %
Inside	67	78.5	34
Section			
Front or A	26.5 %	15 %	66 %
Metro (local)	23.5	26	16
Other	48	59	18
Story type			
News	41 %	34 %	63 %
Feature	46	52	30
News-Feature	12	14	7
Orientation			
Issue	56 %	51 %	68 %
Mix	20	18	24
Individual	25	31	7
Language			
Traditional	36 %	45 %	31 %
Progressive	52	55	69
Quotes			
From deaf persons	71 %	65 %	95 %
None	27	35	5
Sign language			
Mentioned	63 %	63 %	63 %
Not mentioned	37	37	37
Disability models			
Medical	18 %	23 %	2 %
Social Pathology	23	29	5
Minority	37	21.5	83
Cultural pluralism	22	26	10
Reporters			
(Post only)	(N = 90)	(N = 59)	(N = 31)
Staff	78 %	73 %	87 %
Freelance	22	27	13

* Missing values and rounding account for any percentages not adding to 100 percent.

TABLE 3
Story Type by Disability Model

	Traditional Model	Progressive Model
Deaf President Now stories	7 %	93 %
General stories about deaf people	52 %	47 %

(N = 162)
Missing values = .8 %

TABLE 4
Differences in Coverage of Deaf Persons by Year

	Traditional Model	Progressive Model
1986-87 (N = 55)	62 %	36 %
1988 (Year of Deaf Prez Now) (N = 67)	24 %	76 %
1989-90 (N = 40)	40 %	60 %

(Total N = 162)
Missing values = 1.8 %

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